

## Václav Havel on the temptations of political power

On May 28, 1991 President Václav Havel of Czechoslovakia accepted the Sonning Prize for his contribution to European civilization. The biennial prize has been awarded by the University of Copenhagen since 1950. This is the text of Havel's acceptance speech.

The prize I've been honored with today is usually given to intellectuals, not to politicians. I am obviously what can be called an intellectual, but at the same time, fate has determined that I find myself -- literally overnight -- in what is called the world of high politics.

With your permission, I would like to take advantage of my unusual experience and try to cast a critical eye of an intellectual on the phenomenon of power as I have been able to observe it so far from the inside, and especially on the nature of the temptation that power represents.

Why is it that people long for political power, and why, when they have achieved it, are they so reluctant to give it up?

In the first place, people are driven into politics by ideas about a better way to organize society, by faith in certain values or ideals, be they impeccable or dubious, and the irresistible desire to fight for those ideas and turn them into reality.

In the second place, they are probably motivated by the natural longing every human being has for self-affirmation. Is it possible to imagine a more attractive way to affirm your own existence and its importance than that offered by political power? In essence, it gives you a tremendous opportunity to leave your mark, in the broadest sense, on your surroundings, to shape the world around you in your own image, to enjoy the respect that every political office almost automatically bestows upon the one who holds it.

In the third place, many people long for political power and are so reluctant to part with it because of the wide range of perks that are a necessary part of political life -- even under the most democratic of conditions.

These three categories are always, I have observed, intertwined in complicated ways, and at times it is almost impossible to determine which of them predominates. The second and third categories, for instance, are usually subsumed under the first category. I have never met a politician who could admit to the world, or even to himself, that he was running for office only because he wanted to affirm his own importance, or because he wanted to enjoy the perks that come with political power. On the contrary, we all repeat over and over that we care not about power as such but about certain general values. We say it is only our sense of responsibility to the community that compels us to take upon ourselves the burden of public office. At times, only God Himself knows whether that is true, or simply a more palatable way of justifying to the world and ourselves our longing for power, and our need to affirm, through our power and its reach, that we exist in a truly valid and respectable way.

The situation is made more complicated because the need for self-affirmation is not essentially reprehensible. It is intrinsically human, and I can hardly imagine a human being who does not long for recognition, affirmation, and a visible manifestation of his own being.

I am one of those people who consider their term in political office as an expression of responsibility and duty toward the whole community, and even as a sort of sacrifice. But, observing other politicians whom I know very well and who make the same claim, I feel compelled again and again to examine my own motives and ask whether I am not beginning to deceive myself. Might I not be more concerned with satisfying an unacknowledged longing for self-affirmation -- a desire to prove that I mean something and that therefore I exist -- than I am with pure public service? In short, I am beginning to have suspicions about myself. More precisely, my experience so far with politics and politicians compels me to have these suspicions. In fact, every new prize I receive compels me to be a degree more suspicious.

The third category of reasons for desiring political power -- longing for the advantages power brings, or simply getting used to those advantages -- deserves special attention. It is interesting to observe how diabolical the temptations of power are, precisely in this sphere. This is best observed among those of us who have never held power of any kind before. Bravely, we used to condemn the powerful for enjoying advantages that deepened the gulf between them and the rest. Now we ourselves are in power.

We are beginning, inadvertently but dangerously, to resemble in some ways our contemptible precursors. It bothers us, it upsets us, but we are discovering that we simply can't, or don't know how to, put a stop to it.

I will give you several examples.

It would make no sense whatever for a government minister to miss an important cabinet discussion of a law that will influence the country for decades to come simply because he has a toothache and has to wait all afternoon at the dentist's until his turn comes. So -- in the interests of his country -- he arranges to be treated by a special dentist, someone he doesn't have to wait for.

It would certainly not make sense for a politician to miss an important state meeting with a foreign colleague simply because he has been

held up by the vagaries of public transport, so he has a government car and a chauffeur.

It would certainly not make sense for a president or a prime minister to miss such a meeting simply because his car is caught in a traffic jam, so he has the special right to pass cars that are ahead of him or to go through red lights, and in his case the traffic police tolerate it.

It would certainly make no sense for a politician to waste valuable time sweating over a stove and cooking an official meal for a counterpart from abroad. So he has a personal cook and waiters to do it for him.

It would certainly make no sense for the president's cook to go from butcher shop to butcher shop like a normal homemaker in a postsocialist country in search of meat good enough to offer without shame to an important guest. So special deliveries of supplies are arranged for prominent people and their cooks.

It would certainly make no sense if a president or a premier had to look up numbers in the telephone book himself and then keep trying again and again until he reached the person or until the line became free. Quite logically, then, this is done by an assistant.

To sum up: I go to a special doctor, I don't have to drive a car, and my driver need not lose his temper going through Prague at a snail's pace. I needn't cook or shop for myself, and I needn't even dial my own telephone when I want to talk to someone.

In other words, I find myself in the world of privileges, exceptions, perks; in the world of VIPs who gradually lose track of how much butter or a streetcar ticket costs, how to make a cup of coffee, how to drive a car, and how to place a telephone call. I find myself on the very threshold of the world of the communist fat cats whom I have criticized all my life.

And worst of all, everything has its own unassailable logic. It would be laughable and contemptible for me to miss a meeting that served the interests of my country because I had spent my presidential time in a dentist's waiting room, or lining up for meat, or nervously baffling the decrepit Prague telephone system, or engaging in the hopeless task of finding a taxi in Prague when I am obviously not from the West and therefore not in possession of dollars.

But where do logic and objective necessity stop and excuses begin? Where does the interest of the country stop and the love of privileges begin? Do we know, and are we at all capable of recognizing, the moment when we cease to be concerned with the interests of the country for whose sake we tolerate these privileges, and start to be concerned with the advantages themselves, which we excuse by appealing to the interests of the country?

Regardless of how pure his intentions may originally have been, it takes a high degree of self-awareness and critical distance for someone in power -- however well-meaning at the start -- to recognize that moment. I myself wage a constant and rather unsuccessful struggle with the advantages I enjoy, and I would not dare say that I can always identify that moment clearly. You get used to things, and gradually, without being aware of it, you may lose your sense of judgement.

Again, being in power makes me permanently suspicious of myself. What is more, I suddenly have a greater understanding of those who are starting to lose their battle with the temptations of power. In attempting to persuade themselves that they are still merely serving their country, they increasingly persuade themselves of nothing more than their own excellence, and begin to take their privileges for granted.

There is something treacherous, delusive, and ambiguous in the temptation of power. On the one hand, political power gives you the wonderful opportunity to confirm, day in and day out, that you really exist, that you have your own undeniable identity, that with every word and deed you are leaving a highly visible mark on the world around you. Yet within that same political power and in everything that logically belongs to it lies a terrible danger: that, while pretending to confirm our existence and our identity, political power will in fact rob us of them.

Someone who forgets how to drive a car, do the shopping, make himself coffee, and place a telephone call is not the same person who had known how to do those things all his life. A person who had never before had to look into the lens of a television camera and now has to submit his every movement to its watchful eye is not the same person he once was.

He becomes a captive of his position, his perks, his office. What apparently confirms his identity and thus his existence in fact subtly takes that identity and existence away from him. He is no longer in control of himself, because he is controlled by something else: by his position and its exigencies, its consequences, its aspects, and its privileges.

There is something deadening about this temptation. Under the mantle of existential self-affirmation, existence is confiscated, alienated, deadened. A person is transformed into a stone bust of himself. The bust may accentuate his undying importance and fame, but at the same time it is no more than a piece of dead stone.

Kierkegaard wrote *Sickness unto Death*. Allow me to paraphrase your excellent countryman and coin the phrase "power unto death."

What may we conclude from this?

Certainly not that it is improper to devote oneself to politics because politics is, in principle, immoral.

What follows is something else. Politics is an area of human endeavor that places greater stress on moral sensitivity, on the ability to reflect critically on oneself, on genuine responsibility, on taste and tact, on the capacity to empathize with others, on a sense of moderation, on humility. It is a job for modest people, for people who cannot be deceived.

Those who claim that politics is a dirty business are lying to us. Politics is work of a kind that requires especially pure people, because it is especially easy to become morally tainted.

So easy, in fact, that a less vigilant spirit may not notice happening it at all.

Politics, therefore, ought to be carried on by people who are vigilant, sensitive to the ambiguous promise of self-affirmation that comes with it.

I have no idea whether I am such a person. I only know that I ought to be, because I have accepted this office.

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